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Dear Carol

Focused visit to Derbyshire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Derbyshire local authority children's services on 21 and 22 September 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Margaret Burke and Claire Beckingham.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The visit was conducted with the inspectors on site and included some video calls for discussions with local authority staff.

Headline findings

Changes within Derbyshire's political and senior leadership have not deflected the council from its commitment and responsibilities to children. Senior leaders have continued to build on the early signs of progress seen at the last full inspection of children's services. Children in need or subject to a protection plan in Derbyshire now benefit from a stronger and more consistent service response. Children and their families are well supported by committed social workers and managers who know them well, have a sound understanding of their needs and what should happen to improve their lives. They work tirelessly with families alongside partner agencies to ensure that the right support and services are made available for children in their families and network. As a result, many families have been empowered to make positive changes and adjustments, enabling their children to make good progress.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Manageable case/workloads for workers, including social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE), to enable them to complete required tasks and recordings in a timely way.
- Support and oversight of children who are privately fostered

- The accuracy and clarity of some performance data reports.

Main findings

Risks to children are well understood by social workers and managers. The authority continually translates learning from rapid and learning reviews into actions, which strengthen systems and ensure that vulnerable children at the highest risk of harm have protections in place. Decisions on the appropriate thresholds to work with families, step up and step down between early help services, and children's social care services are largely appropriate. Occasionally, families are not stepped up soon enough or referred directly into children's social work teams to enable a swifter response to their needs.

Strategy meetings which take place beyond the Starting Point (Derbyshire's multi-agency front door) are well attended by the right professionals for the family. Decisions to progress to section 47 and subsequently Initial Child Protection Conferences are well reasoned with a clear analysis of presenting risks of harm and their impact. Appropriate plans are made to promote children's immediate safety and improve their well-being. A small number of meetings responding to reported concerns had minor slippages in timescales, or repeated strategy meetings which reset the timescale. While in these cases there was not a negative impact to children who were kept safe throughout the investigative process, this practice potentially creates risks in ensuring that children are seen and responded to quickly.

Strong multi-agency working reflects partners' confidence in social workers. Child Protection Conferences are well attended with contributions from partner agencies who take on appropriate roles in supporting children. Likewise, child in need and core group meetings take place regularly and are well attended, with aspects of the plan well considered and further developed through these meetings. The writing up of the plan itself, with inclusion of clear timescales, is less consistent and timely, often because of the competing demands on social workers with high caseloads.

Most meetings continued to take place remotely. This has strengthened the involvement of some partners and has worked well for some families. Plans for hybrid/blended meetings allowing choice and more direct engagement are in the developmental stages and are not yet fully operational countywide.

Social workers' competence and expertise are very evident in their work with children, their families and carers. Social workers have courageous and honest conversations with families as they seek and build open and trusting relationships with them. They exhibit a high level of empathy for parental stressors without losing focus on the impact on the child. Social workers are generous with their praise and take pride in family achievements, from small advancements to big changes.

Social workers know their children well and recognise their strengths. Visits to children are regular, and recordings capture the whole sense of the visit and include a conversation with each child. The summary, written directly to the child about their

presentation, wishes and feelings, helps to bring the focus back to the child and provides a clear future record for them.

Assessments are brief, to the point and address the issues and risks identified. There is a focus on each child. However, assessments are not all routinely updated when situations change to ensure plans remain appropriate.

Case records demonstrate that social workers, and their managers, have a strong grip of complex family dynamics, intersectionality and risks, while also balancing competing individual needs within large sibling groups. Tailored packages of support to families illustrate the understanding of domestic abuse, substance misuse and neglect in families and the impact on children. Social workers advocate for children and families and garner the support of other statutory services and community resources. Social work interventions have, for many families, produced positive outcomes resulting in greater children's safety and improved family relationships, with parents and children having a better understanding of each other's needs.

Relationship-based social work practice is also evidenced in the specialist disabled children's teams, where holistic family-based social work is often complemented with packages of support assisted by personal budgets. Complexity of need and harm is well understood, and safeguarding concerns are suitably addressed and responded to.

Work has been undertaken to improve the authority's response to children in private fostering arrangements. While some improvements are evident, there are still areas where adherence to Derbyshire's procedures and statutory requirements need to be strengthened to ensure high-quality support packages are in place for privately fostered children.

Senior managers demonstrate strong leadership, which is backed up by corporate and political support for children's services. This is evidence through corporate financial investment, protected budgets, and whole-council support for improving the experiences of vulnerable children.

Comprehensive datasets provide managers and leaders with monthly data reports on key performance areas. Reports are broken down into bespoke areas and allow services to keep on top of their own performance. Inspectors uncovered some inaccuracies in the submitted data relating to the allocation of work and outcome of assessments. During the visit, leaders recognised that improvements and further work are required to ensure accuracy of recording and data reports.

Effective quality assurance systems ensure that leaders have oversight of practice and that quality is routinely checked. Learning and development is identified and responded to in practice. Work in this area is strong and constantly evolving, with further plans underway to develop this service.

Social workers describe a leadership team that communicates with them clearly. Social workers understand and are committed to Derbyshire's children's services'

vision, which maintains children at the heart of decisions made. They say they are happy and feel well supported. One social worker stated, 'I trust the people I work with, and I feel trusted.' Others spoke positively of receiving praise from senior leaders and a culture of celebrating successes.

The local authority supports several routes into social work in Derbyshire. Workers actively chose to work in Derbyshire often through experiences of being a student or being supported in other ways by Derbyshire through their early social work career. Newly qualified social workers in their ASYE year say they feel well supported with shadowing opportunities, a named buddy and responsive line management support. Social workers' supervision and management oversight are regular with clear, sensible advice and defined timescales, both on allocation and throughout case progression. Workers reported good access to practice supervisors, team managers and managers from other teams for ad hoc case discussion and supervision.

All workers have a personal development plan and are encouraged to be ambitious in their careers with Derbyshire. Training opportunities are available to all staff, although some staff were unaware that those opportunities are also available to agency workers.

The main challenges for Derbyshire's social work workforce relate to high caseloads with increasing complexity. While team caseload averages are low, caseloads are too high for many workers, including ASYEs. Leaders in Derbyshire work hard to manage morale and well-being relating to caseload pressures, and currently do well in this regard. Workers spoke positively about being helped to prioritise tasks, and of practice supervisors and duty social workers stepping in with 'hands-on' practical support. They spoke about protected days and time off in lieu. Leaders know that high workloads put a strain on, and can negatively impact, families and workers. Leaders are not complacent; they have ongoing strategies and plans in place to address recruitment and workforce challenges, as they fully recognise the instability these challenges cause.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke
His Majesty's Inspector